Prosecutors seek death penalty for Yoon

SEOUL: South Korean prosecutors called on Tuesday for the death penalty to be handed down to former president Yoon Suk Yeol for his December 2024 declaration of martial law, which plunged the country into chaos.

Yoon triggered a political crisis when he announced an end to civilian rule in December 2024 and sent troops to parliament to enforce it. But his attempt failed and he became the country's first sitting president to be taken into custody when he was detained last January.

Yoon's criminal trial for insurrection, abuse of power and other offences linked to the declaration drew to a close on Tuesday after 11 hours of proceedings. In closing remarks, prosecutors accused him of being the ringleader of an "insurrection" motivated by a "lust for power aimed at dictatorship and long-term rule".

They accused Yoon of showing "no remorse" for actions which threatened "constitutional order and democracy". "The greatest victims of the insurrection in this case are the people of this country," they said.

"There are no mitigating circumstances to be considered in sentencing, and instead a severe punishment must be imposed." Yoon's defence team, meanwhile, have made theatrical arguments in a bid to help him and his alleged accomplices.

On Tuesday they compared the disgraced former leader to great historical figures like Italian scholars Galileo Galilei and Giordano Bruno, who were wrongfully condemned. "The majority does not always reveal the truth," they said.

Prosecutors also asked that former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun be sentenced to life imprisonment.

Proceedings were expected to wrap up last Friday, but were postponed after 15 hours of deliberation — it took eight hours to examine evidence alone for Kim. Kim's lawyer insisted "a short tongue" was preventing him from reading more quickly.—AFP

Deaths outnumber births in France for first time

PARIS: France recorded more deaths than births in 2025 for the first time since the end of World War Two, a development that erodes its long-held demographic advantage over other European Union nations, official figures showed on Tuesday.

The national statistics institue INSEE reported 651,000 deaths last year and 645,000 births, which have collapsed in number since the global Covid pandemic.

France has traditionally had stronger demographics than most of Europe, but an aging population and falling birth rates show it is not immune to the demographic crunch straining public finances across the continent.

INSEE said the fertility rate dropped to 1.56 children per woman last year, its lowest level since the World War One and well below the 1.8 assumed in pension funding forecasts by the pension advisory council. In 2023, the most recent year with EU comparisons, France ranked second highest with a fertility rate of 1.65, behind Bulgaria's 1.81.

The demographic shift will push public spending back to pandemic-era highs in the coming years while eroding the tax base, the national public audit office warned last month.—Reuters

PARIS: French Farmers stand beside potatoes they dumped during a protest in front of the National Assembly against the expected signing of a free trade agreement between the EU and South American countries.—AFP

Afghan Taliban appoint first envoy to New Delhi

Noor Ahmad Noor, a foreign ministry official, assumes responsibility as charge d'affaires

NEW DELHI: Afghanistan's Taliban government has appointed their first senior official in India since the group returned to power in 2021, charged with leading their embassy in Delhi.

India has not officially recognised the Taliban government, but the move signals a deepening engagement, with New Delhi seeking to exploit divisions between Islamabad and Kabul.

Noor Ahmad Noor, a Taliban foreign ministry official, assumed responsibility as charge d'affaires, and has already held meetings with Indian officials, the embassy said in a statement.

"Both sides emphasised the importance of strengthening Afghanistan-India relations," the Afghan Embassy said, in a post on X on Monday.

India has not commented, but the Afghan embassy posted a photograph of Noor with senior Indian foreign ministry official Anand Prakash.

The Taliban's strict interpretation of law may appear an unlikely match for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government, but India has sought to seize the opening.

The appointment is significant for the Taliban, which has sought to reclaim control over Afghanistan's overseas diplomatic missions as part of a broader push for international legitimacy.

In October, India said it would upgrade its technical mission in Afghanistan to a full embassy. Russia is the only country to officially recognise the Afghan Taliban government.

India restored its embassy in the Afghan capital of Kabul last year following warming ties between the two nations.

India had closed its embassy in Kabul after the Taliban seized power following the withdrawal of US-led Nato forces in 2021, but opened a small mission a year later to facilitate trade, medical support, and humanitarian aid.

The decision underscored India's resolve to deepen its bilateral engagement with the Afghan side in all spheres of mutual interest.

New Delhi does not officially recognise the Taliban government but has taken tentative steps to thaw ties with meetings and talks between senior officials in their respective foreign ministries.

India says it remains committed to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Afghanistan, amid Kabul's heightened tensions with Pakistan.

Pakistan-Afghanistan ties have deteriorated sharply in recent weeks amid border clashes and mutual accusations. Islamabad has long been warning Kabul against allowing the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to operate from Afghan soil — a claim the Taliban deny.—Agencies

B'desh summons Myanmar envoy after border clashes

DHAKA: Bangladesh on Tuesday summoned the ambassador of Myanmar after civil war gun battles in the neighbouring country spilled over the border, wounding a Bangladeshi girl.

Heavy fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine state this month has involved junta soldiers, Arakan Army fighters and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militia guerrillas. Authorities said around a dozen villages in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district have been affected by the violence.

Twelve-year-old Huzaifa Afnan was struck by a bullet, while a Bangladeshi fisherman had his leg ripped off after stepping on a landmine near the frontier.

"Bangladesh reminded that the unprovoked firing towards Bangladesh is a blatant violation of international law and a hindrance to good neighbourly relations," a foreign ministry press statement said.

Myanmar's ambassador to Bangladesh, U Kyaw Soe Moe, was summoned to the foreign ministry on Tuesday, where he expressed sincere sympathy to the injured victims and their families.

"My daughter was supposed to go to school, but she is on a ventilator," Afnan's father Jasim Uddin said. "My heart is bleeding for my baby girl." More than a million Rohingya have fled their homes in Myanmar, many after a 2017 military crackdown, and now eke out a living in sprawling refugee camps just across the border in Bangladesh.

ARSA, a Rohingya armed group formed to defend the persecuted Muslim minority, has been fighting the Myanmar military, as well as rival Arakan Army guerrillas.

On Monday, Bangladeshi border forces detained 53 ARSA fighters who had crossed the frontier.—AFP

Sri Lanka forces used sexual violence during Tamil war, UN says

GENEVA: Sri Lankan forces used sexual violence against minority Tamils during the island's decades-long separatist war, and victims still await justice 17 years after the fighting ended, a UN report said on Tuesday.

Troops crushed the separatists following a no-holds-barred offensive and declared an end to the war by May 2009. The spectacular military success also drew allegations of widespread war crimes.

Sexual assaults were used as a tool to extract information, intimidate individuals and communities, and instil a pervasive climate of fear and humiliation, the paper by the UN Human Rights Office said.

"Despite it being a long-standing matter of record, successive Sri Lankan governments have failed to adequately investigate or prosecute cases of conflict-related sexual violence," the report said.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk urged the new government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake to address the issue of impunity in the South Asian nation.

"Recognition, truth, accountability and reparations are critical to restoring dignity to survivors, and advancing reconciliation and healing in Sri Lanka," Turk said at the launch of the report in Geneva.—AFP

Bill and Hillary Clinton refuse to testify in House Epstein probe

WASHINGTON: Bill and Hillary Clinton on Tuesday refused to testify in a Republican-led congressional investigation of the late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, saying it was a partisan exercise.

"Every person has to decide when they have seen or had enough and are ready to fight for this country, its principles and its people, no matter the consequences," the Clintons wrote in a letter to Republican Representative James Comer, who chairs the House of Representatives Oversight Committee. "For us, now is that time." Comer has threatened to hold the Clintons in contempt if they failed to appear before the committee, which could potentially lead to criminal charges.

In the letter shared on social media by Hillary Clinton, the Clintons said they had tried to provide what "little information" they had to help with the investigation and accused Comer of shifting focus away from the Trump administration's failures.

"We've done so because Mr Epstein's crimes were horrific. If the Government didn't do all it could to investigate and prosecute these crimes, for whatever reason, that should be the focus of your work ... There is no evidence that you are doing so," they wrote.

"There is no plausible explanation for what you are doing other than partisan politics," they said, and added that they expect Comer to direct the committee to hold them in contempt. President Donald Trump's administration, under pressure from Trump's political base, has ordered the US Justice Department to release files tied to criminal probes of Epstein, who was once friends with Trump and the Clintons, in compliance with a transparency law passed by Congress.

Contempt proceedings

The Republican-led House Oversight Committee said it would begin contempt proceedings next week after the 79-year-old Democrat did not show up for closed-door testimony scheduled for Tuesday morning.

"As a result of Bill Clinton not showing up for his lawful subpoena — which was voted unanimously by the committee in a bipartisan manner — we will move next week... to hold former President Clinton in contempt of Congress," committee chairman James Comer told reporters.

In an eight-page letter to Comer, the Clintons said they did not plan to appear for the depositions, describing the moment as one requiring resistance "no matter the consequences." Invoking contempt against a former president is rare and would represent a significant step by House Republicans. Any contempt resolution would require approval by the full House before being referred to the Justice Department, which ultimately decides whether to prosecute.

Criminal contempt of Congress is a misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in prison and fines of up to $100,000, though referrals are unevenly enforced. The Oversight Committee is investigating Epstein's ties to powerful figures and how information about his crimes was handled by US authorities.

Conspiracy theories

Epstein, once a friend and associate of Trump and other high-profile figures, was convicted of sex crimes and later jailed pending trial for allegedly trafficking underage girls. The financier died in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial, a death officially ruled a suicide but long the subject of conspiracy theories amplified by Trump's supporters.

The Clintons were subpoenaed in August alongside other current and former officials, including former FBI director James Comey. Their depositions were initially scheduled for October, then delayed twice — once after Clinton said he needed to attend a funeral.—Agencies

NEWSMAKERS

WATER vapour rises from autonomous heating systems during a power blackout in the Ukrainian capital.—Reuters

MINNEAPOLIS (Minnesota, US): Security personnel carry away a woman protesting the fatal shooting of Renee Good by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement last week.—Reuters

TBILISI (Georgia): Gift shop owner Zurab Shevardnadze displays Chichilaki, traditional Christmas trees made from dried walnut branches.—Reuters

A VIEW of an ancient Roman house after it opened to the public at an archaeological park near the Colosseum.—Reuters

Ancient Roman home opens to the public — with remote guided tours

ROME: An ancient Roman home more than 2,000 years old has opened to the public, but its spectacular mosaics, frescoes and stucco decorations will be accessible only via remote and web-streamed guided tours.

The "House of the Griffins", named after animal decorations in one of its rooms, was an aristocratic residence on the Palatine Hill, which sits between the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus arena.

Dating back to the 2nd-1st century BC, it is one of the oldest homes from Rome's Republican era. It was partly destroyed by the foundations of a palace built above it, but two floors have survived.

Little remains of the ground floor, apart from traces of the atrium, with a pool and mosaics. The underground floor, however, is full of wonders, yet accessible only via a dangerously steep and narrow staircase.

That makes it ill-suited for mass visits, so the Colosseum Archaeological Park came up with the idea of a "live-streamed guided tour system", said project leader and archaeologist Federica Rinaldi.

Visitors are made to stand in a room while a guide ventures downstairs with a mobile camera strapped to their forehead, beaming back upstairs what they are seeing, projected onto a wall, capped with an expert's explanation.

The home was previously only accessible to academics and researchers, upon request. The new remote guided tours are being introduced following restoration work financed by the European Union's post-Covid recovery funds.—Reuters

KHARTOUM: Artefacts that were recovered after being looted from the National Museum during Sudan's civil war, are displayed during a ceremony to celebrate the recovery of more than 570 antiquities.—AFP

BUDAPEST: Passengers wait at the Hungarian capital's airport after a temporary closure due to extremely icy conditions.—Reuters